UK Microfest 1 - Window Session

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Microtonal procedures in *Sailing to Byzantium*

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Sailing to Byzantium for solo recorder player was originally written at Durham University between March and May 1990, for the recorder player David Maycock. It was extensively revised in 1999, and the revised version was premièred by Rachel Barnes in London in 2002.

It takes its inspiration from W B Yeats' famous poem of the same name from his late collection *The Tower*, and from the mythological philosophy underlying the poem which is expressed more fully in his prose book *A Vision*. The themes of the book and poem and, hence, the piece are time and transformation, and this led me to a further poetic source of inspiration, T S Eliot's *Four Quartets*, in particular the first, 'Burnt Norton'.

These poetic and philosophical sources inspired and encouraged me to expand my musical language far beyond anything I had explored hitherto. The imaginative world of Yeats' late poetry and associated prose writings was a key determinant of the musical language and techniques used in the piece, along with the nature of the recorder itself, which struck me as a solo instrument of tremendous possibility, potential and flexibility both technically and evocatively. Yeats' vision of the fabled, paradisical city of Byzantium as an environment where art, religion and everyday life

were one, and artifice was seen as superior to reality – a view inspired more by his vivid poetic imagination than any historical reality of course – led me to an expanded musical world unfettered by the constraints of conventional recorder technique, in the manner of a Berio sequenza (and Berio's own recorder piece *Gesti*). Part of this expansion involved the use of microtones (which I'd not considered previously as useful pitch material) as part of a fully integrated musical vocabulary for the work. I was helped in this by my discovery, during the preliminary research for the composition, of the unique suitability of the recorder for producing microtones, due to its wealth of available fingerings unencumbered by the keywork of more developed woodwind instruments, as well as its reliance on breath control over embrochure for refinements of tuning. As Eve O'Kelly states in her 1990 study, *The Recorder Today*, 'It is one of the advantages of the recorder that because of the absence of keys, microtones can be played with accuracy by modifying the standard fingerings' (Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.88).

Microtonality took an integral role in the piece alongside other extended techniques such as harmonics, multiphonics and singing/articulating into the recorder different vowel and consonant sounds derived from the poem *Sailing To Byzantium* and the work's other sources. Some of the pitch material (both microtonal and chromatic) is also derived from the poetic text, using a 'communicable language' similar to Messiaen's.

The fact that some of the key features of these techniques – overblowing, microtonal pitches and intervals, singing into the instrument – relate to or at least evoke certain musics and sounds from outside the Western tradition (Tibetan overtone singing,

ancient Greek music, Japanese shakuhachi playing, even birdsong) also linked in well with both the use of the recorder as a solo instrument and the subject of the poem.

The form of the work is directly related to the poem's structure , translating the four stanzas into four movements, albeit running without breaks and containing a sub-structure which counters this simple parallelism. This sub-structure consists of, after an introductory processional passage played on tenor recorder, a melodic refrain on treble which recurs throughout the piece in increasingly varied forms. A secondary refrain (or 'formula') played on the descant, entitled 'Gyre', evokes the imagery of the gyre or spiral which represents the cycles of time and is central to Yeats' later writings. This is also repeated in varied form later in the work. Interspersed with these recurring elements are a series of 'episodes' reflecting characteristic musical forms – scherzo, aria, dance, chorale – concluding with a processional 'ending' passage which balances the opening.

For the actual production of the microtones, my initial source was Michael Vetter's *Blockflötenschule* (Universal Edition, Vienna, 1983), which was also more broadly influential upon my work. The *Blockflötenschule* is part philosophical tract, part practical treatise itself partly deriving from Vetter's earlier, pioneering tract *Il flauto dolce ad acerbo* (Moeck, Celle, 1969). Michael Vetter was a member of Stockhausen's ensemble in the 1960s, and sought to bring the recorder to the vanguard of cutting-edge instrumental virtuosity through the application of new techniques, utilising the advantages identified by Eve O'Kelly: 'A systematic research into the natural possibilities of the recorder [he writes, in the preface to *Il*

flauto] shows that is conforms by its manifold sonority more to the music of our time than many more "perfect" instruments' (p.7).

From the *Blockflötenschule* I obtained a fingering chart for quarter-tones across the whole conventional and extended range of the recorder (over 3 octaves), and using this as a basis I discovered through trial and error that many eighth tones were also possible.

Microtones in *Sailing To Byzantium* fall into 3 basic categories:

1 Mictrotones produced as accurately as possible using special alternative fingerings, used structurally as part of an integrated pitch vocabulary.

2 Microtones produced by over- or under- blowing a particular note to 'bend' the pitch, for colouristic or expressive affect.

3 Written-out glissandi where the points within the slide are specified by the notation (a notational concept used in some of Xenakis' works although notated differently). The microtones in this category will generally be produced incidentally during the transition from one note to the next by rolling the fingers on or off their holes.

Microtones in the first category were partly composed 'intuitively' but were also integrated into a serial pitch mode used to translate text into music, extending Messiaen's concept of a 'communicable language'to incorporate quarter- and even

eighth-tones, thus providing a pitch for every letter of the alphabet without the need for duplication.

Category (2) are used as a kind of decorative melodic device, similar to sounds found in certain non-Western musics (such as Japanese). Category (3) is an example of the blurring of pitch into sound characteristic of other extended techniques; multiphonics for instance.

Example 1

An excerpt from the beginning of the piece (p.2 bb.13-28) offers examples of the 1st and 3rd category.

Example 2

The work's principal refrain (p.3 bb.30-60) offers a clear example of the 2nd category.

Example 3

The scherzo section of the 1st movement is a good example of the fingered type of microtone used to virtuosic effect, with the occasional bending of pitches by over- or under- blowing (p.5/6 bb.92-127).

Example 4

In the 2nd movement the richer melodic potential offered by a language incorporating quarter-tones is explored in the 'Aria' section (p. 9 bb.171-198).

Example 5

The third movement's drone and chorale section feature the recorder duetting with its player's own voice. Both voice and recorder make use of quarter-tones as they alternate between playing the drone and the overtone-type melody in passages inspired by Tibetan chant, although in the voice part these are necessarily approximate and equate more to the written-out glissando category. The opening passage (p.11 bb.226-233) which has the drone in the recorder part is balanced by the closing one (p.13 bb.265-268) where the roles are reversed.

Example 6

Towards the end of the climax of the 3rd movement (p.15 bb.293-298), fingered microtones form part of an arsenal of compositional strategies also including the singing of specific pitches and vowel sounds into the instrument to create and evoke an almost transcendent virtuosity, reflecting the sentiments of the lines of poetry which correspond to this section:

'Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity'.

Sailing to Byzantium *is currently self-published. The score (and a recording by Rachel Barnes, sponsored by the Bliss Trust), is available from the composer*

Since 2016, the piece has been available from Composers Edition (composersedition.com)
The recording can be obtained by emailing b.inglis@mdx.ac.uk

B ♩ = ca. 132

3:2 5:4 3:2 5:4 6:4 4:3 5:3 6:4

PPP (pulsing) cresc. sempre

OSSIA: †

6 PPP

EXAMPLE 1:

13 f più f mp 4:5 4:3 mf

♩ = 138

X4 ritmico et articulato

22 f

♩ = 138 ♩ = 156

26

quasi gliss.

(28) f più f

* shake instrument to give tremolo effect

Change to Treble recorder.

† If not possible to process during previous section, this simplified passage may be played.

EXAMPLE 2

C (Introduction / Refrain Formula I)

1 breath's length (ca. 15-20")

vibrato

1 breath's length

flzg.

30

p f p

15/8

♩ = 100 - 108

33

p cresc.

ca. 3" ca. 5"

ca. 2"

4/4 mf flzg. 5:4 mf vibrato

mp 3/4 flzg. 5 5 5 4/4 mf

37

f

♩ = ca. 148

mf

45

4:3 4:3 4 5:3 5

6P:7 6:7

54

5:7 3 ♩:4 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 7P:6 5P:3

ca. 5" (vibrato)

f

59

ca. 4"

ca. 6" vibrato

Change to Descant recorder

Change to Treble recorder

[F] (Scherzo - Capriccio)

EXAMPLE 3:

105

108

111

115

119

125

G (Refrain II) ♩ = 148

128

136

Change to Sopranino

EXAMPLE 4

K ♩ = 80 (Aria)

171 P cantabile S.mf sfz. P mp P mp

179 S.mf P mp mf cresc. 5:3 f

186 X5 X8 f ff fff f mf mp mf 2:3 3:2 cresc. f

194 ff fff ffff

L (Refrain IV)

♩ = 148

199 mf 3:4 3:4 3:2

206 mf mp p mf p Change to Tenor recorder

EXAMPLE 5

III. 'O sages standing in God's holy fire ...'

N

1. Grave e solenne (Drone)

1 full breath

Tenor recorder

Voice

226

228

230

232

(vibrato)

(flzg.)

*1 Microtones approximate in voice part

*2 Voice same pitch as recorder

3. (Drone)

p

261

266

Change to Treble recorder

268

EXAMPLE 6

Recorder fingerings

Voice

293

cresc.

ff

f

295

cresc.

ff

fff

297

* Improvise fingerings, changing as fast as possible.